

Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

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Neville Chamberlain: An Unlikely Influence in Post-War British Planning

While the name Neville Chamberlain has an accepted place within the World War II lexicon, it is largely absent in the study of the conflict in relation to architecture and town planning. During the inter-war period, Birmingham, England led the nation in council housing, due in part to the city's alignment with the political career of Chamberlain. As he rose to prominence in the Conservative Party so did the fortunes of the community. Shortly after he became Prime Minister in 1937, Chamberlain used British fears of an air war to launch an investigation into the distribution of the nation's industrial population.

This paper will explore how Chamberlain's attempt to improve the living conditions of the working class through the Garden City aesthetic influenced the New Towns Act of 1946. It will discuss how the model of Birmingham led the Prime Minister's Barlow Commission to call for an "embargo" on future factory construction in London and other large industrial centers. Rather than continuing the policy of rebuilding city centers with affordable housing, new disbursed communities (satellite towns) would be established throughout the country based on the Garden City model.

This paper will examine how Patrick Abercrombie, who had been a member of the commission, salvaged many of the concepts of the plan despite the liability of being linked with one of the chief authors of appeasement. It will discuss Abercrombie's 1944 *Greater London Plan*, which called for eight to ten towns to be built in a ring around the capital. Together, these new communities could re-house 383,000 people. Abercrombie's plan inspired a weary nation and became the core for much of post-war planning.

Finally, this paper will discuss how Chamberlain's patronage impacted Birmingham's role as a leader in town planning and post-war design. In 1945, Birmingham, like much of central London, lay in ruins. The Germans had damaged 103,919 homes, many in areas originally set aside for slum clearance. During 1943, the Ministry of Town and Country Planning established the Advisory Panel on Redevelopment of City Centres. Birmingham's City Engineer, Herbert Manzoni, was one of the panel members. Despite this, three years later, the Government refused to give Birmingham the right to develop a new town under the 1946 Act. The new Labour Government hoped to create the healthy environment of the inter-war estates, but without the middle class cultural agenda promoted by inter-war architects and planners. Rather than rely on "traditional" English forms, they looked to the Modernists who had been driven out by Hitler before the war.

Edmund Potter is an adjunct professor in history at Mary Baldwin College. He teaches both for the Residential College and for the Adult Degree Program. Dr. Potter's areas of scholarly interest include architectural history, modern Europe, modern Britain, and America post 1865. His dissertation examined the role of World War I in shaping the social use of architecture in

inter-war Birmingham, England. He is a member of the American Historical Association, the Society of the History of Technology, and the Society of Architectural Historians.

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